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City's Ballot Boxes Getting Heavy Use

The 15 drop boxes for early voting getting heavy use. Poll worker recruitment going well.

By Jeramey Jannene - Oct 6th, 2020 09:51 am

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A SafeVote dropbox. Photo by Jeramey Jannene.

So far, so good with the 2020 Presidential election in Milwaukee.

That's according to [Milwaukee Election Commission](#) executive director [Claire Woodall-Vogg](#). She briefed the Common Council's Finance & Personnel Committee on the department's pending 2021 budget, but the discussion turned towards the pending election.

The city has recruited 3,500 poll workers with a goal of 4,000. It needs 2,400 on election day. "We are in really good shape right now," said Woodall-Vogg. Of those 3,500, only 1,000 have prior election experience.

"A lot of our recruitment has been done quite frankly by our terrible press from April 7th," she said. "Voters saw a visual of what a poll worker shortage looked like." Milwaukee went from over 170 polling places to just five as the pandemic caused recruitment issues and the city, under a prior election director, pivoted to large voting centers. Over 50 percent of the city's poll workers were over the age of 50 at that point. "We are seeing a younger pool of applicants."

Why recruit so many extra poll workers? A no show rate on election day could hit 20 percent. Woodall-Vogg said one new process would have standby workers gather at a central point, possibly [Miller Park](#), on the morning of the election to be deployed to polling places needing workers. In the past standby poll workers were called when needed and the city would end up waking some of them up, said Woodall-Vogg, a result that delayed getting workers to the polls.

A total of 173 polling places will be open on November 3rd.

She said she hopes enthusiasm carries over to working at low-turnout elections like the February primary. "Our key will be to keep them engaged going into 2021."

Poll workers are paid \$130 for a full day shift plus a \$100 bonus during the pandemic funded by a federal grant. Details, including how to apply, are available on [the MEC website](#).

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"It is very interesting to run elections now because we are essentially running two elections at one time and I expect this will be the case in 2021," she said. Woodall-Vogg estimated in September that approximately 150,000 people would vote via absentee.

A total of [15 drop boxes](#) are available for voters to return ballots, at each of the libraries as well as [Milwaukee City Hall](#) and the election commission warehouse at [1901 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.](#)

"I am going to easily estimate that over 70 percent of the ballots are being returned via dropbox," said Woodall-Vogg. "They're working really well."

The drop boxes, which are secured to the ground and visible via cameras, have a number of anti-tampering features. "There have been no signs of anyone tampering with the ballot drop boxes," she said. Each box is emptied daily and the frequency will grow as needed, including every two hours on election day.

The boxes are so desirable that occasionally voters from other cities use them. "We immediately put" ballots from outside the city into the hands of the USPS, she said, in order to help return them "as quick as possible." On election day the election commission will call other municipalities to let them know of the stray ballots. "In August most of them sent police officers to pick up their ballots from central count," she said.

Milwaukee residents can put their ballot in any of the City of Milwaukee drop boxes or early vote at any of the early voting sites, but if they choose to vote on election day they must vote at their neighborhood polling location.

Alderwoman [Milele A. Coggs](#) asked about spoiled ballots, a risk with by-mail voting. Woodall-Vogg said volunteers work off of a commission-developed script to call voters that submit a ballot without the necessary envelope markings, including a voter signature, witness signature or witness address. Ballots are mailed back to be corrected. "It's a very proactive way that we're trying to get our rejected absentee numbers even lower," said Woodall-Vogg. "I actually believe the City of Milwaukee probably does more than any other municipality as far as contacting the voter and returning the ballot to them."

As of Monday, according to the [Wisconsin Elections Commission](#), 112,955 absentee ballots have been requested by City of Milwaukee residents, 112,047 have been mailed and 35,991 have been returned. Voters can request a ballot and track its status on the state's [My Vote WI website](#).

[Early voting](#) begins October 20th and runs through November 1st. Voters will be able to use any of the 18 early voting sites in the city, including [Fiserv Forum](#) (inside) and Miller Park (drive through).

Woodall-Vogg addressed the council committee to discuss the commission's budget, which is slated to be more than cut in half in 2021, from \$3.16 million to \$1.4 million, under the proposed budget by Mayor [Tom Barrett](#). But the reason is straight forward: there will be fewer elections in 2021. The February 18th primary and April 6th general election are estimated to have a combined turnout of 90,000. Woodall-Vogg did caution that a move to more absentee voting could result in a higher turnout, a win for democracy, but a slightly added expense for the city. "2021 is a little unique and difficult to project," she said.

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